



For Immediate Release

Easton, MD – January 12, 2022

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Talbot County Council Meeting Highlights, Tuesday, January 11, 2022

These highlights only reflect the business items covered from the Council's approved agenda. To view the complete County Council meeting, please visit: Talbot County Meeting Videos - Talbot County, Maryland (www.talbotcountymd.gov).

The Talbot County Council held their regularly scheduled meeting virtually on January 11 with all Council members present. Council voted unanimously to hold a closed session after the meeting for legal and personnel matters.

- I. **Update to Talbot County Board of Health on COVID-19** – Dr. Maria Maguire, Talbot County Health Officer provided an update on the Coronavirus in Talbot County, as well as the health department's response to the current pandemic.

Network Outage

Dr. Maguire shared that the Maryland Department of Health has experienced a network outage. COVID data and other normal information technology access have been suspended since 12/4/21 with limited access returned between 12/20/21 and 12/30/21. Some data and systems remain inaccessible, including detailed county-level COVID hospitalization and related data. There is still no access to normal work on computers, printers, scanners, and other devices. Staff is relying on personal computers, shared computers, loaners, and new purchases that were not budgeted. There is still no access to internal network/servers and files and non-web-based software remains unavailable. Some health departments in the State have no Wi-Fi (depending upon mobile hotspots to work) but Talbot County Health Department does have access to Wi-Fi. She reported that the outage is hindering the department's day-to-day operations.

Omicron Variant

Dr. Maguire reported that there has been an Omicron surge in Talbot County since the beginning of December 2021. There have been 2.5x as many cases daily as the peak a year ago (January 2021) because of Omicron. She reported that back in the spring, it was that alpha variant from the United Kingdom that people were worried about and then we transitioned over to the delta variant for which there was a concern for its severity and impact on hospitalizations and deaths. From early December to today, there has been a 5x increase with over 500 cases of the omicron

variant reported in the past week. This includes several outbreaks in nursing homes and schools. She added that omicron is affecting staffing of the County's core and essential agencies.

Positivity Rates

Dr. Maguire reported that Talbot County's test positivity rate has seen a 3.5x increase in the past month and it is now at 28 percent which means that for every 100 tests performed, 28 tests are coming back positive – the highest positivity rate we have seen in Talbot County. She explained that this trending is similar to what the rest of the state is experiencing at 30 percent, adding that the positivity rate in healthcare settings is 40 to 50 percent. She stated that the Health Department had hoped to keep the positivity rate at 5 percent. She stressed that the omicron variant has been more infectious than the previous variants and explained that epidemiologists use the reproducibility index to determine the average number of people that you as a sick infected person will then go on to infect. As a comparative, Dr. Maguire noted the average number of people likely to get infected with the regular flu is 1.5, the index for the initial alpha virus is 2.5 and 5 for the delta variant. A person with the omicron variant is likely to infect 7 to 10 people whereas the measles index is 12 to 18 people.

Impact on the Health Care System

She provided an update on the impact of the omicron variant on the health care system. As of January 11, 3,452 people were hospitalized in Maryland, far exceeding the delta variant. She stated that hospitalizations could climb to 5,000 people in a few weeks. Hospital ICUs are filled with the increase in COVID-positive patients. The cost of the average COVID hospitalization is \$20-\$30,000 per person. Hospitals are overwhelmed and implementing "Crisis Standards of Care" and canceling non-emergency procedures and implementing crisis staffing levels. She also reported that these increased hospitalizations have caused backlogs in EMS services and hospitals, public safety and other essential services as they are impacted by their own staffing levels being reduced due to illness.

Hospital Generated Data

Dr. Maguire shared that the hospital-generated data shows that Talbot County has had 68 deaths due to COVID, which is not the sharp increase in deaths we saw a year ago.

Those hospitalized in Maryland:

>75% unvaccinated

20% vaccinated but due for a booster

<5% are "up to date" with COVID vaccination including booster

Those in Eastern Shore Hospitals:

80-85% unvaccinated

15% vaccinated but due for a booster

<2% with booster

She reported that the bulk of the hospitalizations is in the unvaccinated, ages 20 to 50 years old and that obesity is a factor in morbidity.

Moving Forward

Dr. Maguire shared that people tend to have a false sense of security if they were vaccinated in the past and have not yet received their booster or have had COVID in the past. She stated that the COVID virus will continue to circulate seasonally after we get through this pandemic, and we need to do what we can as a community to get immunity under our belts so that it will not disrupt society. She added that vaccines keep people out of the hospital, no matter which variant and that boosters are important, even more so for the omicron variant. She stated that people are 25x more protected with the booster than without. She reported that those who are not up to date with their vaccine or are unvaccinated account for 38 percent of Talbot County's total population.

The Talbot County Health Department has purchased rapid and PCR tests, using up the budget for these tests. At-home tests are still limited and the Department receives 250 kits every two weeks. Kits are currently going to emergency and public safety agencies for them to test their employees. Dr. Maguire reported that Easton will be getting a new test site in a few weeks with the help of the Maryland National Guard.

She provided information on how we can each live with COVID and reduce the burden on our hospitals and EMS service during the surge over the next 45-60 days:

- **Get vaccinated, including with booster** – Vaccines are widely available
 - Everyone ages five and older are eligible for vaccination
 - Everyone ages 12 and older is now eligible for a booster - 5 months after the last dose
- **Wear a mask indoors in public** – Dr. Maguire recommended a temporary county-wide regulation requiring face coverings in public for everyone 5 years old and older in public indoor settings, with appropriate exceptions, until 1/31/22. She said that this would enable us to reduce the burden on hospitals and public safety; allow schools to remain in-person; and minimize employee absences in businesses.
- **Get tested if exposed and when sick** - She explained that there is a high demand for tests. She added that there are new State/Federal testing sites opening, but not soon enough. The public can get test kits through local pharmacies, but there is a shortage of test kits. There is a new State portal for reporting positive at-home test results covidlink.maryland.gov/selfreport.
- **If sick, stay home and call your Primary Care Physician (PCP)** – She asked people to avoid going to the ER unless there is a true medical emergency.

In Summary

Dr. Maguire stated that the buildup of immunity is what leads to the end of the pandemic and that this immunity allows society to function with endemic disease. She added that the vaccines are doing what we hoped and keeping most people out of the hospital, however, until most of the population has built up some immunity to severe disease, this will continue to be a significant threat to the public health infrastructure.

County Manager Clay Stamp added, “It has been 668 days since the Emergency Operations Center (EOC) was activated in response to COVID-19, and our community came together. I just want to thank Council for your leadership. The Council distributed grants to our businesses and has worked with our community partners in order to better serve our County. The way we win is small communities all over working together, having tough conversations and finding that middle ground.”

Council President Chuck Callahan thanked Dr. Maguire for her presentation and added, “I owe it to protect myself and others. I am asking people to use their common sense when deciding what to do, including not going out in the public when sick and spreading the virus.”

Dr. Maguire reported that the metrics in school are high right now, but not the cause for the spread. She stated that she is in constant conversations with the schools about distancing, mask requirements, isolation and testing in the schools so that schools can be functioning as much as possible during this time.

II. **Presentation by Talbot County Public Schools on Request from Maryland State Highway Administration Regarding Proposed Improvements at MD Rt. 322 (Easton Parkway) at Glenwood Avenue for Easton Elementary School** – Kevin Shafer, Director of Operations, Talbot County Public Schools reported that there is a small area of right-of-way on the Board of Education property that the SHA is requesting to acquire for stormwater management improvements. SHA proposes to pay \$2,950 to the Board of Education to complete the project. The Board of Education has approved this purchase because they support the overall improvements proposed for the intersection at Maryland Route 322, including a traffic light. Corey Pack asked if the School Board could sell any property without the County Council's approval. Mr. Shafer said that the Board of Education does not have to get approval because the property is under one acre. The Town is supportive of the improvements proposed for this project.

III. **Update from Department of Public Works** – Ray Clarke, County Engineer reported the following:

- Extension of Sewer to the Talbot County Community Center Project - The force main and manholes should be completed this week. The goal is to complete that project by the end of January and connect the Community Center to the wastewater treatment plant in Easton.
- St. Michaels Wastewater Treatment Plant Project - The belt filter press is currently being manufactured and should be delivered to the St. Michaels Wastewater Treatment Plant in May for installation. Mr. Clarke also stated that demolition work on the current belt filter press will begin in February/March.
- Talbot Senior Center at Brookletts Place Parking Lot Expansion Project – The request for proposal for the Senior Center parking lot expansion project will be advertised this week.
- St. Michaels Sewer Collection System Work – Repair work on broken pipes, etc. is scheduled to begin sometime in February and cost approximately \$1.6 million.

- Design Projects:
 - Extension of Sewer to Ferry Point Marina and Surrounding Areas – Maryland Department of the Environment (MDE) is reviewing the Preliminary Engineering Report (PER) for this project and is seeking an alternative means of disposal other than a direct discharge to the Choptank River which is prohibited at the proposed location due to shellfish beds in close proximity to Ferry Point. MDE has proposed engineers consider spray irrigation or soil injection for the discharge. Corey Pack expressed concern that this change will impact the businesses the County is trying to support at Ferry Point and asked for an update from Mr. Clarke by March/April on the status of the project.
 - Preserve at Wye Mills – application for funding is being reviewed by MDE and the County is working with the Assistant Attorney General's Office and MDE on a Consent Order.
 - Region V (Tilghman) Wastewater Treatment Plant – Mr. Clarke is working with MDE on an application for funding for sewer collection system upgrades and extension of sewer to the area of Bar Neck/Fairbank.
 - Black Dog Alley Design Survey – work is being completed by Wallace Montgomery.
 - Airport Road – staff is reviewing right-of-way alternatives as well as possible property acquisition.
 - Goldsborough Neck Road – staff is working on acquiring wetland permits.
 - Sewer Extension for Royal Oak Pump Station and Communities Identified in Resolution No. 235 – County staff will be discussing financing opportunities for the project with MDE.
 - Bozman and Neavitt Sewer Extensions (Resolution No. 250) – County staff continues to meet with MDE to discuss financing opportunities. Anticipate applying for MDE construction permits and other environmental permits in February/March.

Council President Chuck Callahan thanked Mr. Clarke and his staff for all the work they are doing. Mr. Clarke reported that the discharge data for the Region II Wastewater Treatment Plant located in St. Michaels is well below their permit.

Council member Pete Leshner asked about the enforcement mechanisms for property owners tying in downspouts and sump pumps to the Region II Wastewater Treatment Plant and asked if the Council can do anything through resolutions. Mr. Clarke said that the Public Works Advisory Board will be discussing this matter at their next meeting on January 20, 2022.

IV. **Introduction of Legislation:**

A BILL TO REPEAL AND REENACT CHAPTER 102, "PARKS AND RECREATION," TALBOT COUNTY CODE AND TO ENACT A NEW CHAPTER 76 ENTITLED "GOLF BOARD"

Patrick Thomas briefed the Council on the proposed bill which would set forth rules and regulations for parks in the County and separate the Golf Board into its own chapter in the Talbot County Code. The Talbot County Parks and Recreation Advisory Board has reviewed the legislation as well.

Bill No. 1496 was introduced by all Council members. A public hearing will be held on Tuesday, February 8, 2022 at 6:30 p.m.

V. **Public Hearing:**

Resolution No. 314, A RESOLUTION AUTHORIZING THE TRANSFER OF ANY INTEREST TALBOT COUNTY, MARYLAND HOLDS IN A PORTION OF BROOKS LANE TO THE COMMISSIONERS OF ST. MICHAELS AND THE EXECUTION OF A QUITCLAIM DEED TO EFFECTUATE THE SAME

Patrick Thomas reported Brooks Lane was annexed into the Town of St. Michaels in 2017. One of the conditions of that annexation was that Brooks Lane is brought up to town standards which have been done.

The Council voted unanimously to approve Resolution 314 which will take effect immediately.

VI. **County Manager's Report:**

- **Board and Committee Appointments.** Mr. Stamp requested the reappointment of Mr. Paul Spies to the Planning Commission. The Council voted unanimously to approve the reappointment.
- **Request from Roads Department to Award Bid No. 21-14, FURNISHING AND DELIVERY OF AASHTO M43, SIZE NO. 8 & SIZE NO. 7 TRIPLE WASHED AGGREGATE.** Mr. Stamp requested the award of Bid No. 21-14 to the low bidder, Vulcan Construction Materials, Inc. for the unit price of \$31.75/ton with a total bid of \$158,750. A total of three bids were received.

Council voted unanimously to award Bid 21-14 to Vulcan Construction Materials, Inc.

- Mr. Stamp announced County offices will be closed on Monday, January 17, 2022 in recognition of Martin Luther King Jr. Day.

Mr. Leshner encouraged the public to participate in the County's community survey on the American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) Grant funds. The survey is available on the County's website (www.talbotcountymd.gov) in both English and Spanish. He noted, "This is an opportunity for citizens to advise this Council on how they would like to see the \$7.2 million allocated by Congress that is coming to the County. These are one-time funds, and we want to know how people see them being allocated. It is very flexible funding and I think it deserves

citizen voice and citizen input. It is an opportunity for citizens to advise the Council how to spend the federal funds.”

- VII. The meeting adjourned at 8:20 p.m., followed by a Closed Session for legal and personnel matters. The County Council’s next meeting will be held on Tuesday, January 25, 2022 beginning at 6:00 p.m. and will be held virtually. The Council will be convening in Open Session at 3:30 p.m. for a Work Session with Planning & Zoning staff on their recent strategic planning process and then adjourning into Closed Session to discuss real estate, legal, and personnel matters as listed on the Statement for Closing that Meeting.